

# "The Florentine Camerata: Documentary Studies and Translations." By Claude V. Palisca

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Hitchcock, Hugh Wiley (1990) ""The Florentine Camerata: Documentary Studies and Translations." By Claude V. Palisca," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 5. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199003.01.5  
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Claude V. Palisca. *The Florentine Camerata* [:] *Documentary Studies and Translations*. Music Theory Translation Series. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989. vi, 234p.

With this book of eight documents relating to the musical deliberations of the Camerata — that informal but intense group of intellectuals assembled by Count Giovanni Bardi in late sixteenth-century Florence — Claude Palisca adds yet another definitive work to the theoretical studies he has long been publishing. He presents each document in its original language (Italian or Latin) and in a flawless, graceful translation; and he introduces each with several pages of helpful orientation to its contextual background, its main ideas, and its theoretical significance. The book itself is introduced by a summary essay clarifying the history and membership of Bardi's Camerata, with a fresh account of his own qualities as "protean leader."

Here is an outline of the documents included:

- The preface to his translation of Plutarch's *De musica* by Carlo Valgulio, which, written in 1507 and thus antedating by many decades the meetings of the Camerata, nevertheless inspired Bardi and the Camerata's principal musical theorist Vincenzo Galilei, especially in their critique of polyphonic music.
- A letter of 8 May 1572 from Girolamo Mei in Rome to Galilei in Florence, the first in a long series (published earlier by Palisca) that turned Galilei around as a theorist and scholar of ancient music, and "opened the way for the Camerata's main thrust" towards monody.
- Count Bardi's "Discourse Addressed to Giulio Caccini . . . on Ancient Music and Good Singing," presented here for the first time in a critical edition and a complete English translation.
- A reconstruction of a brief treatise, thought by Palisca also to be by Bardi, on how tragedy should be performed.
- Three scientific essays by Galilei, a "consistent and complementary set" dealing with acoustics, tuning systems of classical Greece, and scale structures appropriate to modern music (one of them being equal temperament).
- A memorandum by Giovanni Battista Strozzi the Younger outlining his prescriptions for a good set of intermedi, that characteristic Florentine mélange of song and dance in several movements, to be played before, between, and after the acts of a spoken drama.

For readers of this journal, the documents of greatest potential interest in Palisca's collection are probably Bardi's long discourse on singing, the much briefer one (perhaps also by him) on the performance of tragedy, and Strozzi's prescriptions for intermedi.

Bardi's letter to Caccini (dated 1578 by Palisca) is an out-and-out manifesto for reform of vocal music. His was an explicitly humanist aim — to return music to its classical function of supporting poetry and moving the emotions of listeners. Down with the obfuscating intricacy of counterpoint! Down with the indiscriminate adding of improvised *passaggi* to any old syllable of the text! Down with meaningless virtuosity for its own sake! Bardi prefaces such battle cries with a lengthy theoretical discussion defining "harmony," rhythm, modes, and divisions of the scale in ancient music — not just to show off his learning but, as Palisca says, to demonstrate "how a composer can exploit the particular power of the low, intermediate, and high regions of the voice for the sake of moving listeners to various moral persuasions." Then, warming to his task, Bardi turns aggressively to matters at hand: "I say, then, that music as practiced today is divided into two parts. One is that called *counterpoint*; the other we shall call *the art of good singing*." (So much for the contrapuntal art of madrigals, motets, and masses!) In his new, solo songs and in his singing, says Bardi, Caccini must consider first the nature of the text and choose the proper key to express it in music; then he must strive "to arrange the verse well and to make the words comprehensible," as the divine Cipriano de Rore learned to do late in life; and "if for the pleasure of listeners [he wishes] to make some florid embellishments," he should make them only on "long" syllables — i.e., accented ones, such as the sixth or tenth in the eleven-syllable line common to madrigal poems. Freedom of rhythm is perfectly appropriate: "When singing alone to the lute, harpsichord, or other instrument, one may contract or stretch the measure at will." "Sweetness," finally, is an ultimate goal: "The fine singer must . . . execute his songs with as much smoothness and sweetness as he can summon, [for] whoever wants to sing well had better do so very sweetly." Most of these matters are familiar from Caccini's preface to his *Nuove musiche* of 1602; but that was indebted to the discussions of the Camerata (as summarized in Bardi's discourse), and the Count's passionate pleas and programmatic principles come across more powerfully than Caccini's often turgid prose.

The anonymous essay on how tragedy should be performed is hardly a half-dozen pages in length but pithy and pointed, with ideas (and prose style) that strongly suggest Bardi's authorship. A humanist bias is apparent in the first sentence — "It is reasonable that, wishing to discuss how to perform tragedy, we should recall the ancient [tragedy]." — and in the urgings that modern producers of plays should try to model their performances, particularly those of the chorus, on classical practice. Of *musical* performance, little is said apart from aspects of the chorus,

which Bardi considered of great importance "because of both its music and its dancing," and the dependent relationship of music to text (the central focus of Bardi's aesthetics). For Bardi, ancient tragedy was primarily worth imitating because the actor-musicians "followed the verses of the poet with respect to rhythm and accompanied them by the sound of the voice and instrument with such dexterity and sweetness that no word of the poem was lost" (as opposed to modern musicians, who "spoil the verse with *passaggi* and other unbecoming manners, called by [them] ornaments of singing").

G. B. Strozzi the Younger was not a member of the Camerata but was a leading author of intermedio texts and well known as such to Bardi, Caccini, and other Camerata participants. (He wrote the fourth intermedio of the famous set for the play *La Pellegrina*, produced for the festivities of 1589 in Florence celebrating the wedding of Grand Duke Ferdinando de' Medici and Christine of Lorraine; one part of that intermedio was set to music by Caccini, another by Bardi.) His memo on what makes a good intermedio reads as if he were reacting to a proposal for a set of them drafted (perhaps by himself) for a specific Florentine celebration; Palisca speculates that the occasion was the wedding in 1608 of crown prince Cosimo de' Medici, son of Ferdinando, and Mary Magdalen, Archduchess of Austria. Strozzi proposes seven qualities desirable for a successful set of intermedii, elaborating briefly on each; they are (1) grandness of subject, (2) wonder and novelty, (3) clarity ("Idiots ought to be able to understand it . . ."), (4) delight, (5) suitability to the play with which the intermedii are to be presented, (6) connections among the several intermedii of a set, and (7) allusion to the occasion for which the play and its intermedii are being produced. As with Bardi's discourse on the performance of tragedy, Strozzi's prescriptions for intermedii are tantalizingly skimpy on musical matters; in fact, he brings music up only once, saying that the goal of *delight* can be achieved not only by "the richness of the costumes and the novelty and beauty of the machines, [and by] the skills and elegance of the players, [but by] the sweetness and variety of the music, most of all when the words are beautiful and affective and can be heard." (The shadow of Bardi, with his preoccupation for comprehensibility of text and sweetness of sound, colors this little essay as it does others in Palisca's gathering.)

This book, you will have realized, is a learned one, a model of serious scholarship. It also, however, reads well and is leavened here and there with lightness and wit. One passage I cannot resist quoting is from Palisca's account of a play by Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Il Giudizio di Paride*, for which Strozzi contributed one intermedio:



This was a judgment of Paris with new twists. . . . Paris finds the [three] goddesses in their splendid dress [among whom he is to choose the loveliest] equally beautiful and demands that they appear to him in the nude, and they agree. But the audience is not treated to this birthday-suit competition, for the judgment, like the dire events of a tragedy, takes place offstage and is reported by the shepherd Ermilio, who sneaked a [peek].

("Peek" is misspelled as "peak," in one of the few typos in the entire book.)

Besides its scholarly weight and its readability, Palisca's documentary study is generous in helpful guides to its contents. I have mentioned his prefatory essays to the documents; they are fully annotated, as are the translations themselves. And there is a long and very carefully prepared index. No one could have done Giovanni Bardi and his Florentine Camerata more honor.

H. Wiley Hitchcock